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Race, belief system complexity, and partisan-ideological sorting

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ABSTRACT
Despite a great deal of scholarly attention to the concept of partisan-ideological sorting, few analyses have investigated differences in sorting patterns among subgroups of Americans, with most opting to examine broader trends among the entirety of the mass public instead. However, recent work shows that Black Americans have not sorted to the same degree as Whites. We (1) extend previous studies to include an examination of Latinos and (2) offer an explanation for lower levels of sorting among non-Whites: belief system complexity. We argue that as one's belief system – operationalized by issue attitudes or core values, for example – becomes more multidimensional, the probability of neatly sorting along a unidimensional continuum decreases. Using data from the 1986–2016 ANES American National Election Studies, we first show that Black and Latino Americans have more complex political belief systems, operationalized in several different ways, compared to Whites. Then, we examine the relationship between various measures of belief system complexity and sorting, observing strong relationships that help account for the discrepancy in sorting between White and non-White Americans.

Introduction

Sorting – the dynamic process by which partisan and ideological identities increasingly match (i.e., Democrats are liberal, Republicans are conservative) – is one of the most important political processes of the past half-century. Since the 1970s, the correlation between partisan and ideological identities has more than doubled among the American mass public, with recent years exhibiting correlations greater than 0.70 (Levendusky 2009). Sorting is closely related to polarization (although the direction of this relationship is in dispute), and surely contributes to the heightened animosity of contemporary American political culture (Lelkes 2018; Mason 2015, 2016). In a nutshell, sorting appears to be happening and consequential.

There is (at least) one important caveat to this story: the vast majority of studies of sorting examine trends among the entirety of the American mass public, implicitly

ignoring potential variability among subgroups of various sorts. This is particularly problematic as substantial evidence has emerged documenting important differences in public opinion among different groups – especially racial and ethnic ones – in the American electorate. Indeed, racial and ethnic groups oftentimes vary not only in *what* they think, but *how* they think about politics. For instance, ideology among Black Americans appears to be more multidimensional than it is among Whites (Philpot 2017), the structure of authoritarian attitudes varies across racial groups (Perez and Hetherington 2014), and recent work even finds that the process of sorting differs between Black and White Americans (Enders and Thornton 2022) and that Blacks and Latinos are less ideologically polarized than Whites (Lasala Blanco, Shapiro, and Wilke 2021). These findings have led researchers to conclude that "one size fits all" models whereby racial and ethnic identities are merely controlled for using dummy variables are clearly deficient for understanding important variability in public opinion (Enders and Thornton 2022; Zingher 2023).

In this manuscript, we focus on racial and ethnic group differences in sorting, considering not only which groups are more (less) sorted than others, but also potential explanations for this variability. Even though sorting has unfolded in the aggregate, recent work finds that Black Americans are considerably less sorted today than are Whites, both in the South and other regions (Enders and Thornton 2022). Using the 1986–2016 American National Election Study cross-sections, we extend this examination to Latinos, finding that they, too, are considerably less sorted than Whites. We argue that a principal reason for the lack of sorting among Black and Latino Americans is belief system complexity. Simply put, the more likely one's core beliefs – ideology – are to be multidimensional, the less connected ideology will be to partisanship, and, therefore, the less sorted one will be.

We begin our analysis by examining three different operationalizations of belief system complexity among White, Black, and Latino Americans: the average correlation between issue attitudes, the correspondence between operational ideology and ideological identity, and the strength of the relationship between core political values – moral traditionalism and egalitarianism, specifically – typically viewed as central to the American culture war. In each case, we find a higher degree of belief system complexity among Black and Latino Americans compared to Whites. Next, we generate individual-level measures of belief system complexity so that they may be used as explanatory variables in a regression model predicting sorting. We find that all three measures of belief system complexity are significantly – both statistically and substantively – related to sorting, controlling for other factors. This model predicts a nearly 0.14-point gap in the probability of being sorted between Whites and Latinos, and a 0.2-point gap between White and Black Americans.

Our study advances a burgeoning literature on racial and ethnic group differences in American public opinion. Our findings underscore recent work arguing that ideology cannot necessarily be validly assessed using the familiar unidimensional measure of ideological identities for Americans – among many groups, this is simply not a reasonable proxy for ideology, nor, of course, does it accurately capture the dimensional structure of belief systems. Since accurately understanding why people believe what they believe and forecasting behaviors (e.g., voting) relies on accurate measures of core beliefs, the literature must be more diligent in exploring group differences, or at least providing

caveats about the generalizability of findings. Our results also demonstrate that the acrimony and division commonly characterizing the American electorate either does not uniformly apply across racial and ethnic groups, or, at least, that it is driven by different forces across such groups. That Black and Latino Americans have sorted at drastically different rates and to different current levels compared to Whites not only showcases the importance of taking inter-group variation seriously, but also calls into question the veracity of perhaps the primary explanation for mass polarization.

Background and expectations

We begin with an empirical observation: relative to Whites, non-White Americans exhibit substantially lower levels of correspondence between their partisan and ideological identities, or sorting. We demonstrate this with data from 2012 to 2016 American National Election Studies (ANES), which is displayed in Figure 1, where we classify respondents as sorted if their ideological self-identification matches that of their partisanship (i.e., Republicans identify as conservative; Democrats as liberal). We see that a majority of Whites, 56%, are sorted. This is compared to fewer than 30% of Latinos and 25% of Black Americans.

To explain differences in sorting across groups, we must look at both of the primary ingredients of sorting: partisanship and ideological self-identification. We begin with partisanship, as much ground has been trodden in this area. Blacks overwhelmingly support the Democratic Party. This follows in terms of both self-identification and vote choice (e.g., Philpot 2017; Tate 2010; White and Laird 2020). Black Americans also display stronger partisan attachments than do Whites. Simply put, partisan attachments among Black Americans are strong and heavily favor the Democratic Party. While the precise figures vary over time, Black Americans have consistently exhibited higher levels of partisan attachment than others in the electorate – indeed, even at the nadir of partisan strength among the electorate in the late 1970s and early 1980s, 42% of Blacks strongly identified with a party compared to about 25% of Whites and 17% of Latinos.

Latinos have long held weaker attachments to the two major parties compared to White and Black Americans (e.g., Hajnal and Lee 2011; Sears, Danbold, and Zavala

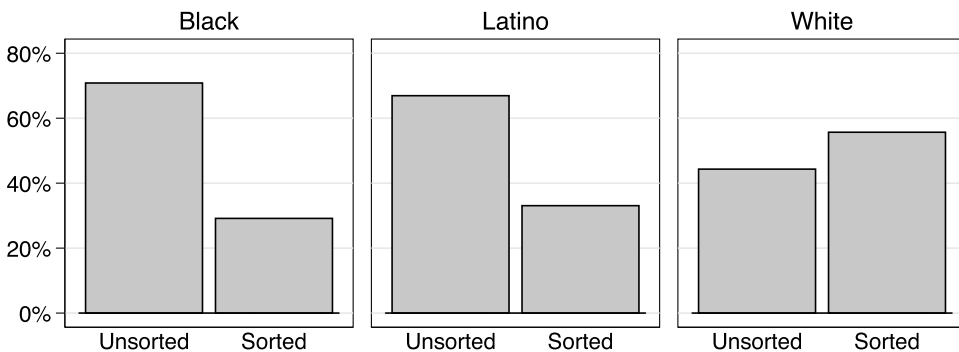**Figure 1.** Rates of Sorting among Black, Latino, and White Americans. Pooled 2012–2016 ANES data. Note: $n_{Black} = 1024$; $n_{Latino} = 1002$; $n_{White} = 3505$.

2016). Weaker attachments stem, in part, from the experiences of a new and younger population (Alvarez and Garcia-Bedolla 2003). For example, it has been argued that second-generation Latinos face a longer path to partisan attachments without the process of transmission from parents – that is, "the traditional partisan attainment story is unavailable to many second-generation Americans" (Carlos 2018, 384). Accordingly, social and economic attitudes share a weaker relationship with partisanship as compared to Whites (Zingher 2023). In sum, while partisan attachments are not likely to be the culprit behind relatively low levels of sorting among Black Americans, relatively weak partisan attachments may play a role among Latinos.

Explanations for the lack of sorting among Black and Latino Americans can also be found in the complexity of Black and Latino belief systems (Philpot 2017; Tate 2010) – the focus of our study. While complexity often refers to more far-reaching, and thus parsimonious, belief systems, we refer to structural complexity, indicating multidimensionality (e.g., Feldman and Johnston 2014). We refrain from discussing the interconnectedness of idea elements in a belief system as "constraint" (or lack thereof), because, as Philpot (2017) notes: "citizens come to politics from different angles and that the path that leads them to the political world affects how they interconnect different ideas. Thus, there are some cases where life's circumstances leads to a divergent imaging of politics that is logically coherent given the situation. For no other group is this truer than for African Americans" (pg. 60–61). In other words, structural complexity is not always synonymous with a lack of constraint (around shared ideas of what "liberal" and "conservative" constitute). Empirically, given that Black Americans are more liberal on social welfare issues than economic ones (e.g., Tate 2010), it is unclear how such complexity would translate to the unidimensional seven-point ideological self-identification measure commonly used to operationalize sorting.

Existing evidence on Latino public opinion also suggests relatively complex belief systems. Ideology relates differently to vote choice, and the particular patterns of different socialization and incorporation into the party systems influence this relationship (Alvarez and Garcia-Bedolla 2003). Similarly, ideology and partisanship may not be as closely related for Latinos as for others in the electorate – in part due to socialization, but also because of "variations in the political system of their homeland" (Abrajano and Alvarez 2011, 282). Recent evidence suggests that there exist no instances of symmetric polarization among Latinos – i.e., no cases in which Republicans have grown more conservative while Democrats have grown more liberal (Lasala Blanco, Shapiro, and Wilke 2021). Rather, Latinos remain, on average, more moderate than Whites.

We can also see the multidimensionality of Black and Latino ideology when examining core political values, which, at least partially, underwrite ideology. Recent evidence indicates that value orientations are quite similar across different ideological self-identifications for Black Americans – i.e., Black moderates and conservatives have similar value preferences, as do those who identify as liberal (Ciuk 2017). Defenderfer (2019) examines an even broader range of values than Ciuk (2017) and similarly finds a less parsimonious value structure for Blacks compared to Whites. Most relevant to our argument, this broader set of values also shares a weaker relationship with ideological self-identification for Black Americans. Simply put, as the multidimensionality of ideological and value structures increase, the average correlation between ideological identities and partisan identities are likely to hit a ceiling, thereby prohibiting high degrees of sorting.[1]

Latino value orientations tend to be similar to those of White Americans in that there are different orientations across different ideological labels, though values share a weaker relationship with partisan and ideological identifications (Ciuk 2017), consistent with evidence that the relationship between religious traditionalism and such identification – and issue attitudes (Kelly and Morgan 2008). Similarly, Saavedra Cisneros et al. (2022) find that political values – in particular, moral traditionalism – among Latinos relate less strongly to attitudes about government spending compared to Whites.

Altogether, past research suggests that the belief systems of Black and Latino Americans are likely to be more complex and multidimensional than the belief systems of Whites. This, in turn, complicates the process of sorting. Minimally (and somewhat tautologically), multidimensionality is unlikely to translate accurately to a unidimensional continuum, such as that used to measure ideological identities in common operationalizations of sorting. All else equal, the less valid and reliable the unidimensional measure of ideological identity, the weaker the correlation between partisanship and ideology. This is not to say, however, the sorting is merely measured improperly when it comes to Black and Latino Americans – the poor translation from multidimensional belief systems to a unidimensional measure of ideological identity is a substantive problem with roots in the conceptualization of the ingredients of sorting and how they vary across groups.[2]

From this discussion, we derive two expectations. First, ideological and value complexity should each be negatively related to sorting – the more multidimensional one's core political beliefs, the less likely their partisan and ideological identities are to neatly align along a unidimensional left-right continuum. Second, we should observe that predicted levels of sorting – at the average level of ideological and value complexity for each group – are significantly lower among Blacks and Latinos compared to Whites.

The structural complexity of belief systems

To initially examine the plausibility of our argument that belief system complexity contributes to lower levels of sorting among Blacks and Latinos compared to Whites, we examine the relationship among several indicators of belief systems. To do so, we utilize the 1986–2016 American National Election Studies (ANES).[3] We restrict our attention to these years as they contain each of the necessary items to construct our variables of interest. While many individual years of the ANES – as a nationally representative sample – often contained relatively small subsamples of Black and Latino respondents, recent years are both larger in overall size and include over-samples of Blacks (2008, 2012) and Latinos (2012). Moreover, we pool the data across years to increase our sample size of Black and Latino respondents. The resulting sample is 2405 Black, 2237 Latino, and 15,324 White respondents.

To begin, we first calculate the average inter-item correlations between responses to the core five issue attitude items the ANES has employed over time: general government spending preferences, preferences about defense spending, attitudes about the proper role of government in providing aid to racial minority groups, guaranteeing a basic standard of living, and funding health insurance. In each case, variables range from 1 to 7 and are coded so that greater values represent more liberal responses. For Whites, the average inter-item correlation is 0.35. Compare this to Black Americans, for whom $\bar{r}$=0.19, and Latinos, where $\bar{r} = 0.21$.

Results of factor analyses of these attitudes, by group, reveal similar patterns.[4] For Whites, a single factor explains 80% of shared variance across the attitudes and no attitudes have a loading (factor pattern coefficient) with an absolute value greater than 0.30 on any factor other than the first. For Black Americans, the first factor explains 67% of shared variance (the second factor another 22%), and two attitudes (defense spending and general government spending) have loadings greater than an absolute value of 0.30 on the second factor (0.48 and -0.44, respectively). Finally, for Latinos, the first factor explains 72% of shared variance (the second factor another 20%), and two attitudes (defense spending and general government spending) have loadings greater than an absolute value of 0.30 on the second factor (0.43 and -0.43, respectively) Thus, non-Whites are more likely to experience tension between their issue attitudes and are less likely to adhere to a single ideological dimension.

The ideology of Blacks, in particular, appears to be multidimensional, consistent with past work. For example, the patterns of correlations for Black Americans suggest distinct economic and social welfare dimensions to ideology, as others have argued before (e.g., Philpot 2017): attitudes about aid to minority groups, a guaranteed standard of living, and health insurance are more strongly correlated with each other ($\bar{r} = 0.38$) than they tend to be with attitudes about general or defense-related government spending ($\bar{r} = 0.15$). Further, while a summated scale of these five attitudes produces a reliable measure of issue preferences for Whites ($\alpha = 0.72$), this is less the case for Black Americans ($\alpha = 0.57$) and Latinos ($\alpha = 0.62$).

We next turn to examining the relationship between operational, issue-based ideology and the symbolic, identity-based measure of ideology. While the mismatch between issue attitudes and ideological self-identification in the public has, in part, been explained by many adopting ideological labels that "have largely symbolic, nonissue-oriented meaning to the mass public" (Conover and Feldman 1981, 641), this is not the entire story; given the attitudinal patterns just described – where Whites exhibit greater correspondence between issues – we expect to observe a weaker relationship between operational and symbolic ideology among non-Whites. This is precisely what we observe. Among Black Americans, the correlation between the two is $r = 0.20$; for Latinos, $r = 0.30$. The correlation is considerably larger among Whites at $r = 0.54$.[5] For Blacks and Latinos there is a noisier translation of issue attitudes to ideological self-identification.

Finally, we consider the relationship between two core political values: egalitarianism and moral traditionalism. People's orientations toward these two values have been found to distinguish Democrats from Republicans, liberals from conservatives, with these two values in particular defining a major fault line in the culture wars (Jacoby 2014). These values also moderate the strength of the connection between partisanship and ideology – or, sorting (Lupton, Smallpage, and Enders 2020) – and contribute to affective polarization (Enders and Lupton 2021).[6] Furthermore, value disagreement is associated with a lower likelihood of sorting (Ciuk 2023). The correlation between egalitarianism and moral traditionalism among Whites is 0.31: the more conservative orientations one exhibits toward one value, the more conservative they tend to be toward the other (e.g., believing that "newer lifestyles are contributing to a breakdown in society" and that we would be "better off if we worried less about equality"). For Black Americans, however, these values are essentially uncorrelated ($r = 0.01$). Indeed, while Black Americans exhibit a similar moderate penchant for moral traditionalism as Whites,
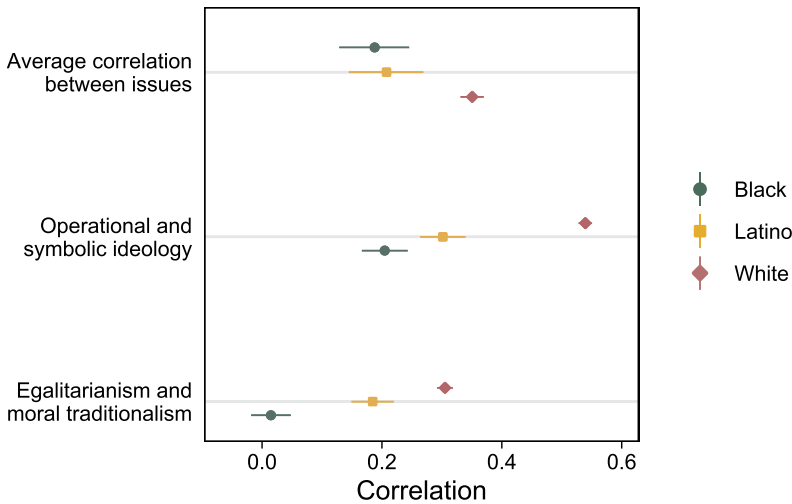
Figure 2. Correlations between issues, values, and ideology by race and region. Pooled 1986–2016 ANES data.

they also display considerably stronger egalitarian values than Whites. Among Latinos, we observe a stronger correspondence compared to Black Americans, though weaker than for Whites, at $r = 0.19$. Here we see that, similarly to Blacks and Whites, Latinos express, on average, a moderate orientation toward moral traditionalism; moreover, they are more egalitarian than Whites, but less so than Blacks.

We summarize each of the three sets of relationships we have explored in Figure 2. The relationships among these constructs are clearly different across racial groups. In particular, non-Whites exhibit more structurally complex belief systems across the board – issue attitudes are more clearly multidimensional, the correspondence between operational and symbolic ideological orientations is weaker, and the values of egalitarianism and moral traditionalism are less compatible. We next turn toward an exploration of the relationship between belief system complexity and sorting in an effort to test one mechanism behind relatively low levels of sorting among Black and Latino Americans.

Race, complexity, and sorting

To test whether the complexity of ideology and value orientations contribute to lower levels of sorting among non-White Americans we specify a model where sorting is regressed on individual-level measures of these concepts, plus standard controls for church attendance, evangelicalism, education, income, age, sex, region, and race. As in the preceding section, we pool the data from 1986–2016 so as to increase the non-White sample. After accounting for missingness, the resulting sample sizes are: $n_{Black} = 2964$, $n_{Latino} = 2465$, $n_{White} = 15,307$. We begin by outlining the operationalization of our variables.

Sorting. To measure sorting, we use the standard seven-point ideology and partisanship self-identification items. We classify respondents as sorted with a dichotomous measure where 1 denotes congruence between partisan and ideological identities,

regardless of identity strength, and 0 denotes lack of a congruence, including those respondents who failed to place themselves on the ideological self-identification measure. We adopt this approach rather than alternative measures as it allows us to include those who do not identify with an ideological label (i.e., they are treated as unsorted). We view this as essential as a substantial percentage of respondents chose not to place themselves on the seven-point measure of ideology and as such would be excluded from our analysis. For example, in the entire sample, 21% of respondents do not answer the ideology question, including 36% of Black Americans.[7] That said, our analyses replicate using Mason's (2015) measure of sorting, which involves the strength of identity as well as direction; see the supplementary material for model estimates. Further, as we detail later, we estimate a model where we directly account for those individuals who decline to answer the ideological self-identification question.

Ideological complexity. We measure the complexity of a respondent's belief system using five-issue attitudes included in each of the years we analyze. More specifically, complexity is measured by folding an additive scale of the five issue attitudes at its midpoint (i.e., average or complete moderation across all five issues) and multiplying the scale by −1.[8]

After rescaling the variable to range from 0–1, 0 represents individuals who have consistently strong attitudes in one direction or another (e.g., liberal or conservative), while 1 represents the most complex attitude structures.

Value complexity. To assess value complexity, we utilize the same procedure outlined for ideological complexity on the items tapping egalitarianism and moral traditionalism discussed in the proceeding section. We rescale the variables to range from 0 to 1, where 0 represents individuals who have consistently strong attitudes in one direction or another (e.g., liberal or conservative), while 1 represents the most complex value structures.

Control variables. We control for demographic variables related to sorting and our primary variables of interest, including church attendance, a dummy variable indicating if the respondent is an evangelical, a seven-point measure of education (ranging from less than high school to an advanced degree), a five-point scale of income, age (measured in years), a dummy variable for sex. Additionally we include dummy variables for Black and Latino respondents (with White as the omitted reference category). Details regarding question wording and coding instructions are included in the supplementary material. Note that we do not control for partisan or ideological identities because those variables compose the dependent variable, sorting.

We estimate the model on pooled data with year fixed-effects. The model is estimated using logistic regression. Results are in Table 1. As expected, all three key explanatory variables exhibit negative and statistically significant relationships with sorting. Ideological and moral traditionalism complexity, in particular, share a strong relationship with sorting. Moving from one standard deviation below the mean of ideological complexity to one standard deviation above is associated with an increase of 0.13 in the probability of being sorted. A corresponding shift in moral traditionalism complexity is associated with an increase of 0.14. Egalitarianism complexity shares a weaker but statistically significant relationship with sorting.

Having established a relationship between belief system complexity and sorting, we next turn to our primary interest, which is to showcase some of the central reasons why non-White Americans' partisan and ideological identities are less aligned than those of Whites. Because each of these constructs are negatively related to sorting, and because

Table 1. Logistic regression of sorting on ideological and value complexity, with controls.

	Sorted			
Ideological Complexity	−1.239*			−1.128*
	(0.055)			(0.059)
Egalitarianism Complexity		−0.597*		−0.379*
		(0.054)		(0.057)
Moral Traditionalism Complexity			−1.357*	−1.215*
			(0.055)	(0.057)
Church Attendance	0.258*	0.289*	0.075	0.107*
	(0.039)	(0.040)	(0.041)	(0.042)
Evangelical	−0.030	0.025	−0.048	−0.064
	(0.035)	(0.036)	(0.037)	(0.038)
Education	2.111*	2.016*	1.981*	1.976*
	(0.061)	(0.062)	(0.063)	(0.065)
Income	0.623*	0.653*	0.584*	0.601*
	(0.058)	(0.059)	(0.060)	(0.062)
Age	0.100	0.083	−0.030	−0.016
	(0.074)	(0.075)	(0.077)	(0.079)
Female	−0.238*	−0.248*	−0.251*	−0.249*
	(0.030)	(0.030)	(0.031)	(0.032)
Black	−0.919*	−1.077*	−0.771*	−0.890*
	(0.049)	(0.052)	(0.051)	(0.054)
Latino	−0.596*	−0.628*	−0.470*	−0.505*
	(0.049)	(0.051)	(0.051)	(0.053)
Constant	−1.213*	−1.717*	−1.063*	−0.126
	(0.084)	(0.082)	(0.086)	(0.099)
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pseudo-R^2	0.130	0.118	0.136	0.149
n	22,851	21,518	21,496	20,736

Note: Pooled 1986–2016 ANES data. Standard errors in parentheses.
  *$p < 0.05$

Black and Latino Americans exhibit greater levels of ideological and value complexity than Whites, the probability of sorting is significantly lower compared to Whites. Figure 3 shows the predicted probability of sorted identities (i.e., liberals who identify as Democrat, conservatives as Republican) for each group, setting the ideology, egalitarianism, and moral traditionalism complexity variables at their mean values for each group. White Americans are considerably more likely than non-Whites to be sorted, P(Sorted) = 0.47. And, consistent with our earlier evidence that the belief systems of Black Americans are particularly multidimensional, we observe a probability of being sorting of only 0.27. Latinos, with a probability of 0.33, are more likely than Blacks to be sorted, but substantially (and significantly) less likely than Whites.

Altogether, it makes substantive sense that we observe lower levels of sorting among non-Whites. On the one hand, Black Americans are unwavering in their support for the Democratic Party in the timeframe we investigate – there is a little possibility, given the stability of Black partisanship, for partisanship to be causing the sorting dynamic. On the other hand, Black ideology is complex, multidimensional; it does not adhere to a unidimensional left-right continuum, nor does the familiar strategy for measuring ideological identities appear to operate validly for Black Americans. Turning to Latinos, extant evidence documents the complex relationship between values, ideology, and partisanship – in part due to different incorporation and socialization process of different groups, which subsequently influences the socialization process of second-generation Latinos. Moreover, even the core value orientations theorized to substantially underwrite ideology and guide sorting are related in different ways across different racial groups.
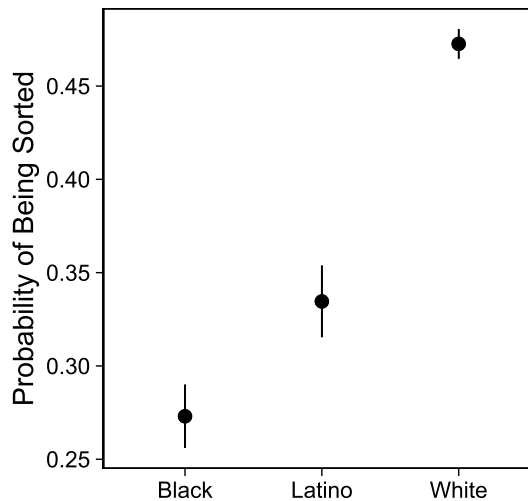
Figure 3. Predicted probability of sorting for average profile of ideological and value complexity. Pooled 1986–2016 ANES data.

Extensions and robustness checks

Here we examine the extent to which our key results depend on data and measurement choices. We first expand on the number of issue attitudes we consider so as to increase confidence our results are not an artifact of the questions the ANES has consistently asked over the last 35 years. We next examine if our results hold equally well across polarized and non-polarized eras. Third, we limit our analysis to Democrats to investigate the extent to which conservative White Republicans may be driving our results. Finally, we separate out those who choose not to place themselves on the ideological scale – who to this point had been treated as unsorted. In each case, we obtain results substantively identical to those presented in the previous sections.

Analysis of additional items using 2012 ANES

A potential concern about our results is that it might be the particular set of issues we examine that is driving the difference in observed complexity across groups. In our primary analysis, we are limited to those items included continuously from 1986 to 2016. To demonstrate the patterns we observe are not limited to these particular items, we examine a wider range of issues using the 2012 ANES. The 2012 ANES is suitable for such a task as it contained an oversample of Black and Latino Americans.

The 2012 ANES includes a number of relevant items that span spending and social issues. In all, we are able to include 23 items with the 2012 data. The full list is included in the supplemental material. We code each issue attitude variable so that greater values represent more left-leaning responses. As before, these issues are, on average, more strongly related among Whites: for Whites, $\bar{r} = 0.29$; for Black Americans, $\bar{r} = 0.07$; and for Latinos, $\bar{r} = 0.20$. To further demonstrate the complexity of Black and Latino belief systems we perform a factor analysis. Among Whites, the first factor explains 52% of the observed variance and only the first three factors have an eigenvalue
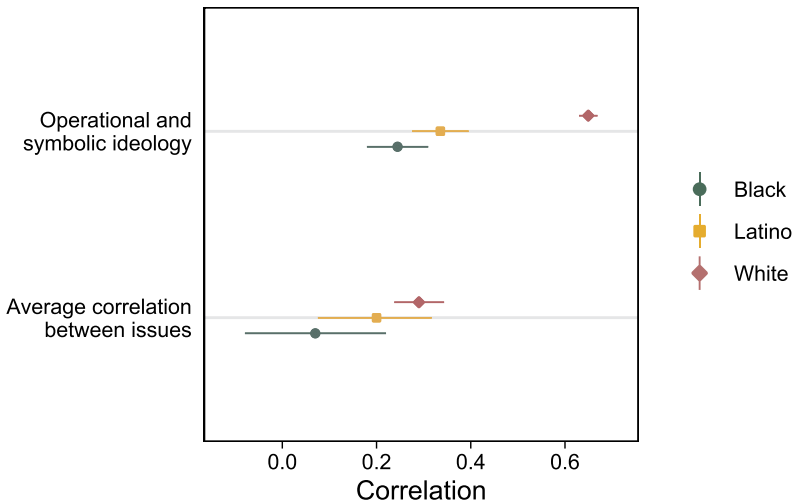
Figure 4. Correlations between issues, values, and ideology by race. 2012 ANES data.

greater than one. Among Blacks, the factor analysis returns a five-factor solution and the first dimension explains just 17% of the variance. Turning to Latinos, we observe a four-factor solution and the first factor explains 38% of the observed variance among the items. As with the pooled data, an additive scale of these issues correlates with ideology more highly among Whites ($r = 0.65$) than Blacks ($r = 0.25$) and Latinos ($r = 0.34$).

We display these correlations in Figure 4. The conclusions reached in the main analysis do not appear to depend on the inclusion of just those items the ANES has consistently asked. Rather, belief systems among Black and Latino respondents are more structurally complex than are White respondents.

Restricting analysis to polarized times, 2004–2016

In the interest of increasing our sample size of non-Whites, our main analysis includes all years with the necessary variables. However, the existing literature convincingly demonstrates that the public began to clearly respond to elite polarization following the 2000 election (e.g., Bafumi and Shapiro 2009). Thus, our main analysis may misrepresent the relationship between complexity and sorting. As such, we replicate our primary analyses using data only from 2004 onward which represents the polarized era. The resulting sample sizes are $n_{Black} = 1733$, $n_{Latino} = 1633$, $n_{White} = 7151$.

We first note that the relationship between complexity and sorting does not appear to differ across eras. To demonstrate this is the case, we estimate a model that includes 1986–2016 and interact each complexity variable with an "era" dummy variable coded 0 for 2000 and earlier and 1 for 2004 and later. In each case, the interaction between era and our variables capturing complexity is insignificant at the 0.05 level indicating no differences across the two time periods. Full results of this analysis are presented in the supplementary material.

We next replicate the model in Table 1 using only data from 2004 onward. We present the quantities of interest in the lefthand panel of Figure 5, the predicted probability at the
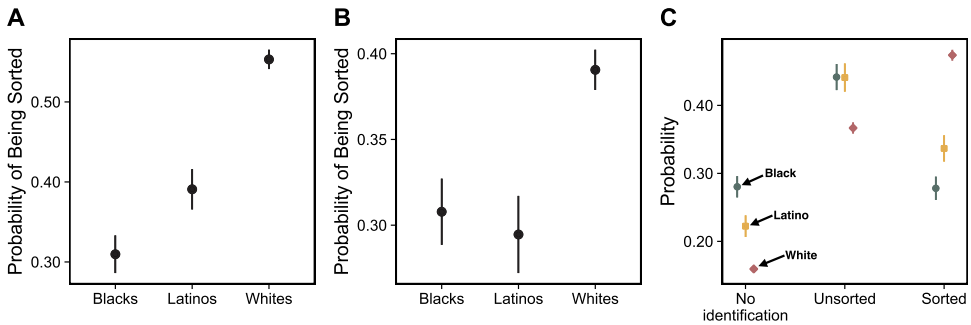
Figure 5. Panel A presents predicted probabilities from an analysis restricted to 2004–2016. Panel B presents predicted probabilities from an analysis restricted to Democratic identifiers. Panel C presents predicted probabilities from multinomial regression where those without an ideological label are categorized as such rather than as unsorted.

average profile of ideological and value complexity, while full results are presented in the supplementary material. Our key conclusion holds with this data – indeed, the gap between Whites and non-Whites is slightly larger when limiting the analysis to post-2000. When we further restrict our analysis to just 2012 and 2016, we again reach an identical substantive conclusion.[9]

Investigating potential partisan asymmetries

Another weakness of our main analysis is that it might be the case that the observed difference between Whites and other groups is asymmetrically driven by conservative White Republicans. It is well established that Whites are substantially more likely to identify with the Republican Party; for example, in the data considered in our main analysis, 89.2% of Republican identifiers are White, suggesting it may simply be the case that Democrats are less sorted overall. Accordingly, we replicated our central analysis, restricting the sample to Democratic identifiers. The resulting samples sizes are: $n_{Black} = 2511$, $n_{Latino} = 1524$, $n_{White} = 6443$.

Full results of this analysis are presented in the supplementary material. Predicted probabilities are presented in the middle panel of Figure 5. While White Democrats are less sorted than White Republicans, we nevertheless observe that they are more likely to be sorted than Black and Latino Democrats. In other words, the racial and ethnic disparities we observed above apply regardless of party identification.

Examining respondents without an ideological label

Up to this point, our analyses have coded those who elected not to place themselves on the seven-point ideological scale as unsorted. As noted, there are reasons to suspect that those who decline to answer the question may be qualitatively different than those who do, suggesting that treating them simply as unsorted may lead to erroneous conclusions. As an alternative coding strategy (e.g., Halliez and Thornton 2021), we create a three-category nominal variable – sorted, unsorted, and those without an ideological self-identification – and re-estimate the models presented in Table 1.

Results from a multinomial regression model are presented in the supplementary material. The quantity of interest is presented in the Panel C of Figure 5. The figure displays the predicted probability (with 95% confidence intervals) of having no label, being unsorted, and being sorted. Consistent with evidence presented above, Whites are more likely to be sorted. Further, Black and Latino respondents are less likely to place themselves on the seven-point scale.

Conclusion

In this study, we examined differences in sorting between Black, Latino, and White Americans, finding that the former two possess considerably less sorted political identities than do the latter. To account for this, we advanced a theory about the role of belief system complexity. We argued that as the structural complexity of belief systems increase, the less likely one is to neatly square their core political beliefs with their partisan identities. Black and Latino Americans are likely to exhibit complex, multidimensional belief systems that cannot be neatly measured using a unidimensional, bipolar continuum, as ideology is oftentimes conceptualized and measured, largely because of more complicated histories with the party system and different political experiences than White Americans. We found evidence for this argument: Black and Latino Americans exhibited lower correlations between issue attitudes, a weaker degree of correspondence between operational ideology and ideological identity, and more complex core value structure than Whites. Individual-level analogs of each of these measures of belief system complexity were substantively and statistically significantly related to sorting and controlling for other factors.

The central conclusion of our study is that empirical observations of sorting (in the aggregate), and theories about the causes and consequences of sorting, do not neatly apply to all Americans. Black and Latino Americans are considerably less sorted than Whites, which prompts a question about the role and importance of sorting in explaining the heightened animosity and discord that has come to characterize the contemporary political landscape. Of course, there could be other experiences or characteristics unique to Black or Latino Americans that make up for the lack of sorting – recent work identifies group norms and group consciousness as two possibilities (Enders and Thornton 2022). However, that both levels of sorting and the fundamental structure of the belief systems that (at least partially) underlie sorting are so different among racial and ethnic groups is still noteworthy.

If the structure of belief systems and the accuracy of common measures of ideology vary across groups (Philpot 2017), it stands to reason that many other elements of public opinion – especially those "downstream" of ideology, as many specific beliefs and orientations are – might also vary in structure or character. From a measurement perspective, it should not be assumed that measures of common political orientations, identities, attitudes, and worldviews operate in the same way across racial and ethnic groups, and are, therefore, directly comparable. In other words, many public opinion constructs are unlikely to be measurement invariant, or, alternatively, are likely to exhibit differential item functioning (Enders 2021; 2022 2022). More than a methodological nuisance, such patterns should be treated as substantively interesting, theoretically important phenomena to be taken seriously. In this vein, our study is another voice in a

growing chorus of work demonstrating the urgency of exploring and incorporating group differences into theories of public opinion (e.g., Zingher 2023).

Our study is not without limitations. While it seems reasonable to assume that belief system complexity causally precedes sorting (indeed, ideology is a component of sorting), there may be reciprocal effects between these constructs whereby the more sorted one becomes, the more their belief system responds by becoming more unidimensional. We also do not argue that we have identified the only or even the central mechanism that differentiates racial and ethnic groups in terms of sorting. Other socialization-related considerations, experiences with and incorporation into the U.S. political (party) system, and group-specific situational factors are likely to be at play, albeit more difficult to empirically measure. We encourage future work to consider other reasons by central opinion processes, like sorting and polarization, may differ across groups.

We also acknowledge that our analysis is limited to only Black, Latino, and White Americans. This is partially practical, as even many years worth of ANES surveys, for example, do not provide enough Asian or Native American respondents on which to conduct robust tests of our theory. Instead, these and other groups will need to be intentionally oversampled in the future – we strongly encourage an expansion of our study to other racial and ethnic groups and characteristics and experiences unique to those groups that might explain fundamental differences in the structure of public opinion.

Notes

1. This process is likely to be exacerbated by the measurement of Black ideological identities: complex ideological and value structures are unlikely to be accurately represented by a unidimensional left-right continuum, resulting in an inherently noisy measure of sorting. Indeed, both Philpot (2017) and demonstrate that the commonly used seven-point ideological self-identification measure does not accurately distill ideological preferences for Black Americans; this seems likely, given the evidence presented below, to apply to Latinos as well. Even if it did, however, we would still expect low levels of sorting among Blacks for whom ideological and partisan identities are simply not synonymous.
2. We also think it is worthwhile to consider whether the concept of sorting even applies when multidimensional ideologies are involved. While this is beyond the scope of this investigation, we believe it does. However, multidimensionality is likely to impose a ceiling on how sorted a given group is likely to become, diluting the importance and utility of the sorting construct, especially as an explanation for polarization (at least among some groups).
3. The 2020 ANES dropped two of the longstanding items used to measure moral traditionalism. As such we exclude it from our analyses.
4. The exploratory factor analysis models were estimated using the iterated principal axis factoring method; unrotated solutions are interpreted.
5. We do not suggest that these are the only dimensions of political attitudes among Americans; rather they are the dimensions that underwrite these particular attitudes.
6. Each value is measured using four items continuously included on the ANES from 1986–2016. For egalitarianism: "Our society should do whatever is necessary to make sure that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed." "It is not really that big a problem if some people have more of a chance in life than others." "The country would be better off if we worried less about how equal people are." "If people were treated more equally in this country we would have many fewer problems."
   For moral traditionalism: "The world is always changing and we should adjust our view

of moral behavior to those changes." "This country would have many fewer problems if there were more emphasis on traditional family ties." "The newer lifestyles are contributing to the breakdown of our society." "We should be more tolerant of people who choose to live according to their own moral standards, even if they are very different from our own."

7. While inclusion of respondents who have not placed themselves on the ideology scale makes sense theoretically (i.e., one cannot sort without expressing this identity), as noted, our conclusions are identical when excluding these individuals.

8. For example, take $A_1, A_2, \ldots, A_j$ to be separate attitudes (e.g., about political issues, egalitarianism) coded such that more liberal attitudes are assigned greater negative values (e.g., $-1, -2, -3$), more conservative attitudes are assigned greater positive values (e.g., 1, 2, 3), and neutral/moderate attitudes are assigned a value of 0. The procedure for generating the complexity scores is as follows:

$$\text{Complexity} = -1 \left| \frac{A_1 + A_2 + \cdots + A_j}{j} \right|.$$

9. $n_{\text{Black}} = 587$, $n_{\text{Latino}} = 591$, $n_{\text{White}} = 4954$.

Disclosure statement

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